

Auto Bike Rack Instant Success

\$5 Investment Launches Jobless Engineer on New Career

(First in a Series on How the Unemployed Professional Finds New Work.)

By DONNA LEE

Engineer Richard Allen used to don suit and tie and fight the traffic to work. Now, dressed in old hiking shorts, he builds bicycle racks for cars in his garage in Lincoln.

He sets his own hours ("I usually quit around 5 p.m., but I have worked until 10 p.m. on rush orders.") He takes off when orders are slack (he and his Dutch wife Nelleke spent six weeks in Holland last winter.)

The setting is idyllic. From an open garage door, Allen looks out over grass and gardens. Trees hide neighboring houses.

It's a great way to work, and it was launched by necessity. Allen lost his job doing

laser research for AVCO in Everett a year ago. He knew the layoff was coming. He also knew that it would be so bad trying to find another job that the best thing to do was to start a new business.

HE DIDN'T want to job hunt elsewhere. "I figured if I couldn't make it here, I couldn't make it anywhere," says Allen.

He had designed and built a rack to carry bikes on his VW, because he and Nelleke, a former airline stewardess,

liked to camp and take their bikes along.

"People who drive small cars tend to be bike riders," he commented. But with the craze for bikes, he decided that there was a need for a universal rack, that could be used to carry bikes on any car... from a compact to a station wagon. So he worked day and night for three weeks to design one.

His rack carries up to four bikes on the back of the car, and converts to carry skis. He

has even seen the rack carrying a baby carriage, folding wheel chair, animal cages and outboard motors. And one person used it to transport a giant codfish.

Allen cobbled up a hodgepodge of machinery to start production. "I bought surprisingly little... I improvised it all. My original capital investment was this \$5 tubing bender," he grinned. He bends the tubing by hand, claiming he works as fast as a machine could. He has done as many as 100 racks a day. With a man to help, he once made 100 in four hours.

TWO OLD MOTORS are paired to give the power of one to the hand-made drill press. He combined parts of other old motors to build a lathe. He has a wood stove to keep the open garage somewhat warm in winter.

Nelleke has helped bend tubing and pack fittings. But Allen now hires a high school girl after school to pack fittings. A young Harvard graduate who can't find an engineering job works four hours a day with Allen.

Alexander, 3, and Christopher, 4, clomped around in wooden shoes, talking to their mother in Dutch (they're bilingual). "The boys can get in my hair sometimes," admits Allen. And Nelleke admits that it took her about six months to get used to having a husband around all the time. "You get used to being interrupted," she smiles. "But I think it's great!"

Allen sensed the bike boom three years ago, and thinks that 10 years from now bikes will be even more popular. Some people now use the rack so they can drive part way to work, park their car and bike the rest of the way. Others drive to vacation spots such as the Cape and bring their



HIS OFFICE is a crowded corner of the basement: his pretty secretary is his wife. Nelleke came to Cambridge from Holland and became a stewardess for Northeast Airlines. Now she helps Dick with his bike rack business.

bikes along. The rack can also be hung on the wall, to store bikes up out of the way.

HE SELLS SOME racks himself, but most he sells to distributors, who sell to the dealers. Dealers can charge whatever they want. He has seen prices ranging from \$19.95 unassembled to \$29.95 installed.

"I like bike dealers," says Allen. "They're a good type. They had to hang on during 20 years when business was bad; now they still have problems because they can't get bikes enough to sell."

And bike dealers could hardly help liking Allen. He

and Nelleke are warm, easy-to-be-with people... though Nelleke laughingly admits that some dealers call Dick "the mad scientist."

"I've been so snowed under with orders that I'm afraid to stir up any more now," says Allen. His garage was piled high with cartons of finished racks, ready to be shipped to California. He crams the old VW with the cartons to take to a trucker. His relationship with the neighbors is good, and he doesn't want to change it by bringing in trucks.

He figures he has sold around 10,000 racks in the year he's been in business.



CHOPPING TUBING to make the Allen Universal Bike Rack, Dick Allen works with makeshift machinery in his garage. He spent as little as possible, using old motors and parts to set up his year-old business at home.

THEY'RE AVAILABLE everywhere, from small bike dealers to Lechmere Sales. He found dealers quite receptive, since his is the only convertible rack for all cars.

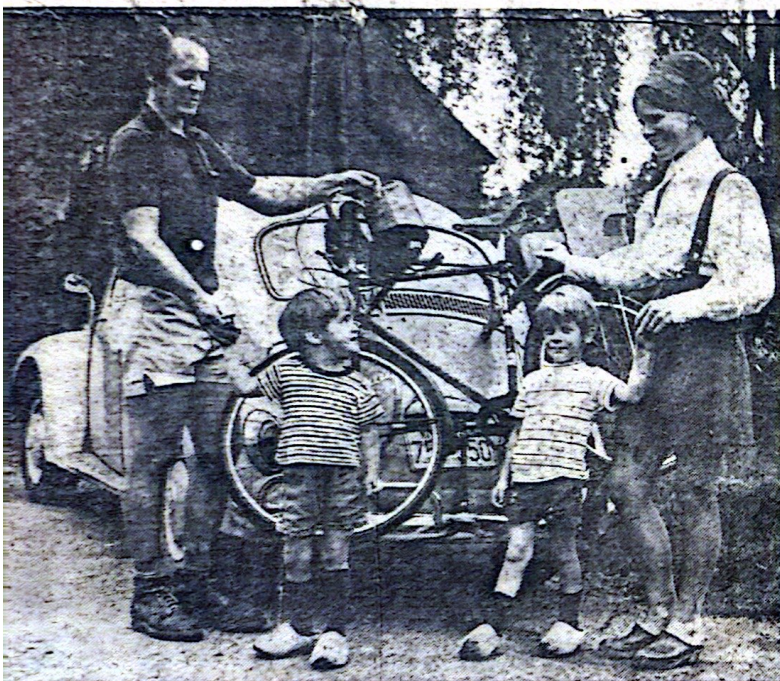
It's handled in England by Raleigh. A Dutch firm markets it for Common Market countries.

But there's one cloud. A large corporation sent two engineers to see Allen. They looked the rack over and offered him a royalty to let them take over the manufacture. He turned them down. Two weeks later they put a copy on the market in Chicago.

"It burns me up," says Allen. "They told me to sue I wanted." He knows he can afford a legal battle with huge company, but he's optimistic.

"They used cheaper materials," he said. "I tried one and it collapsed." He adds, "Even if big companies give you trouble, you can still survive. He's also working on other developing products.

Would he ever want to return to the business suit and to 5 life? Allen grimaced the thought. "This is much more fun!"



(Herald Traveler Staff Photos by Julian Carpenter)

WHEN THE ALLENS go off to the Cape or New Hampshire, the bikes usually go along, too. Loading up outside their home in Lincoln are Dick, 3-year-old Alexander, 4-year-old Christopher and Nelleke Allen.